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Abstract

The word 'Dalit' is from the Marathi, literally 'crushed' or 'ground down'; it's the name that the former 'Untouchables' have preferred to the more patronizing name that Gandhi gave them, Harijan or people of God.

BAAMA

From *Karukku*, the autobiography of a Tamil Dalit woman

COMMENTARY & TRANSLATION BY LAKSHMI HOLMSTRÖM

The word 'Dalit' is from the Marathi, literally 'crushed' or 'ground down'; it is the name that the former 'Untouchables' have preferred to the more patronizing name that Gandhi gave them, Harijan or people of God.

'Baama' is the pen-name of a Tamil Dalit woman, from a Roman Catholic family. She has published three main works: an autobiography, *Karukku* (Blades), 1992;¹ a novel, *Sangati* (Happenings), 1994;² and a collection of short stories, *Kisumbukkaaran* (Mischief-maker), 1996.³ *Karukku* traces Baama's life-story as a Catholic Christian growing up in a small village in Tamil Nadu, becoming educated, entering a convent, and leaving it seven years later, disillusioned by the persistence of caste oppression and discrimination within the church and its institutions.

The place of autobiographies in the development of modern writing by Indian women has been well charted. Tharu and Lalita in their monumental *Women Writing in India*, point out that many of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century autobiographical texts 'are a personal testimony of the new sense of worth these women experience as "individuals", whose specific lives were of interest and importance'.⁴ There is an interesting parallel here with the beginnings of self-consciously styled Dalit women's writing and, indeed, with the beginnings of Dalit writing as a whole. 'Dalits, who have for so long been treated as commodities owned by others must needs shout out their selfhood, their "I", when they rise up'.⁵

Tharu and Lalita also point to the tension in modern autobiographical writing, between the 'life scripts that cultures provide at particular junctures in their history', and the details of individual life which both internalize these blue-prints and struggle against them. Such a tension, in fact, is a starting point for fictional writing; for novels of quest and self-discovery. In the case of *Karukku*, though, the self-exploration as woman and as Dalit takes place within the most prescriptive of life scripts. Baama, framed within the tight parameters of caste, chooses to add the tight prescriptions of religious life when she becomes a Catholic nun. From this position, painfully, she works out her choices, leaving the convent, disillusioned, after seven years.

Karukku means palmyra leaves with serrated edges. Baama explains

the image in her introduction:

Between the saw-edged palmyra *karukku* and my own life there are many connections. I used to pick up the scattered palmyra *karukku* in the days when I was sent to gather firewood, and scratch and tear my skin as I played with them. All the same, they became the embryo (*karu*) and symbol that grew into this book ... Dalits seeking to create a new world based on Justice, Equality and Love are themselves as *karukku*, challenging their oppressors on all sides. (p.ix)

By a felicitous pun, the word *karukku*, containing the word *karu*, embryo, also means freshness, newness.

'Baama', as I pointed out earlier, is a pen-name. Many Tamil authors, both men and women, use the convention of writing under a pseudonym. In this case, though, this convention adds to the work's strange paradox of reticence and familiarity. It reads like an autobiographical novel, or a fictionalized autobiography. The events of Baama's life are not arranged according to a simple, linear or chronological order, as with most autobiographies, but are reflected upon in different ways, repeated from different perspectives, grouped under different themes, for example, Work, Games and Recreation, Education, Belief, etc.. Thus the early part of the book is also rich in descriptive and ethnographic detail, retrieved with affection and pride, piecing together a Dalit life-style.

The argument of the book is to do with the arc of the narrator's spiritual development: the nurturing of her belief as a Catholic, and her gradual realization of herself as a Dalit. Such a double perspective makes it possible for her to understand the deep rift between belief and practice. We are given a very full picture of the way in which the Church ordered and influenced the lives of the Paraya Catholics. Every aspect of the child's life is imbued with the Christian religion. The day is ordered by religious ritual. The year is punctuated by religious processions and festivals, which become part of the natural yearly cycle of crops and seasons. But, parallel to this, religious life is a socio-political self-education that takes off from the revelatory moment when she first understands what untouchability means.

Baama joins a religious order, in spite of her own fears and misgivings, and the active discouragement of her friends and family. She does so in the stubborn hope that she will have a chance to change things, to redress the balance from humble acceptance of oppression to staking a claim for justice. But she realizes more and more the lack of space within the order for her to achieve this as a teaching nun.

She sees an important change, however, if not in the Church's practice, yet in the increased awareness among Dalits, of what has been happening:

They have understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. They are

filled with a new strength to reclaim that likeness which has been repressed, ruined and obliterated, and to begin to live with honour and respect and love of all humankind. To my mind, that alone is true devotion. (p.89)

Clearly she understands that her own experience is part of a larger movement among Dalits. Yet, it is interesting that she appears to come to this awareness of her own accord. She does not, for example, seem to have access to liberation theologians (as does Vidivelli, in a parallel autobiography⁶). She refers neither to Ambedkar nor to Periyaar, who not only attacked the caste system, but whose remarkable speeches and writings against the oppression of women were published in 1942 under the title *Pen yeen adimaiyaanal?* (Why did woman become enslaved?).⁷ Nor indeed does Baama – again, unlike Vidivelli – make a connection between caste and gender oppressions. Not in *Karukku* at any rate; she does so, abundantly, in *Sangati* and elsewhere. *Karukku* is concerned with the single issue of caste oppression within the Catholic church and its institutions, and presents Baama's life as a process of lonely self-discovery. Baama leaves her religious order to return to her village, where life may be insecure, but where she does not feel alienated or compromised. The tension throughout *Karukku* is between the self and the community: the narrator leaves one community (of religious women) in order to join another (as Dalit woman). *Sangati* takes up the story of that new community.

Dalit writing – as the writers themselves have chosen to call it – has been seen in Tamil only in the past decade, and later than in Marathi and Kannada. It has gone hand in hand with political activism, and with critical and ideological debate, spurred on by such events as the Ambedkar centenary of 1994, and the furore following the Mandal Commission report (submitted in 1980, but discussed nearly 10 years later), recommending more reserved places for the so-called Other Backward Castes in Government Services. The notion of 'Hindutva', which has gained currency since 1990 or so, and which assumes a seamless Hinduism to which all Indians other than Muslims, Christians and Sikhs conform, has called out a strong Dalit critique.

The Tamil equivalent of the Marathi 'Dalit' is *taazhtapattor*, used in this specific sense by Bharati Dasan in the 1930s, when he was working for the Self Respect movement. He uses it in the poem *Taazhtapattor samattuvapaattu*, 'Song for the equality of the oppressed'. Indeed the new Tamil Dalit writing constantly refers to the anti-caste, anti-religious speeches of E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyaar), founder of this movement. All the same, although the Tamil words *taazhtapattor* or *odukkappattor* are used in much of the literature by both writers and critics, it is significant that the preferred term is Dalit, implying militancy, an alliance with other repressed groups, and a nation-wide – or even universal – identity. ('Who are Dalits? All those who are oppressed: all hill peoples, neo-Buddhists, labourers, destitute farmers, women, and all

those who have been exploited politically, economically, or in the name of religion are Dalits', from the 1972 Manifesto of the Dalit Panthers.⁸

More recently, Raj Gautaman has pointed to the different functions of Tamil Dalit writing, and the different local and global readerships it addresses. First, he says, it is the function of Dalit writing to awaken in every reader, a consciousness of the oppressed Dalit, and to share in the Dalit experience as if it were their own. (*Karukku*, he says, is a singular example of a piece of writing which achieves this.) At the same time, according to Gautaman, the new Dalit writing must be a Tamil as well as an Indian version of a world-wide literature of the oppressed; its politics must be an active one that fights for human rights, social justice and equality.⁹

I think that it would also be true to say that, while much of the Tamil Dalit writing does indeed function as Gautaman claims, centrally concerned to raise awareness of the Dalit experience, Baama's work (like that of VidiVELLI, ImaYam and Marku) explores a changing Dalit identity. There is, in this writing, a very powerful sense of the self and the community as Dalit, which rejects outright, on the one hand, the notion of *varnasrama* (the justification of a ritually stratified society); and, on the other, refuses to 'sanskritize', to appraise Dalit life-style according to mainstream Hindu values. But there is also a powerful sense of engagement with history, of change, of changing notions of identity and belonging. Baama captures a moment that contains a paradox: she seeks an identity, but seeks a change which means an end to that identity.

I must conclude by commenting briefly on Baama's use of language. Baama is doing something completely new in using the demotic and the colloquial regularly, as her medium for narration and even argument, not simply for reported speech. She uses a Dalit style of language which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of received upperclass, uppercaste Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading. *Karukku* also, by using an informal speech style which addresses the reader intimately, shares with the reader the author's predicament as Dalit and Christian directly, demystifying the theological argument, and making her choice a matter of conscience.

As well as this subversion of received Tamil, all Dalit writing is marked by certain other characteristics. It reclaims and remains close to an oral tradition made up of work-chants, folk-songs, songs sung at rites of passage, as well as proverbs – and some of this tradition belongs particularly to the women's domain. *Karukku*, very interestingly, also tells a story of Tamil Dalit Catholicism in the vocabulary that it uses, particularly in the central chapter which describes her spiritual journey from childhood faith to her return home after departing from the convent. There is often a layering of meaning in certain words, for example, where a Tamilised Sanskrit word is given a new Catholic

meaning, as when Tamil *mantiram* (sacred utterance, but also popularly, magic charm or spell) from Sanskrit *mantra* becomes 'catechism' in Catholic use. Hence, often, there is a spin or a turnaround of meaning; a freshness in some of the coinages, and different routes and slippages in the way Catholicism has been naturalized (and sometimes not) into the Tamil of the text.

Baama's work is not only breaking a mainstream aesthetic but proposing a new one which is integral to her politics. What is demanded of the translator and reader is, in Gayatri Spivak's terms, a 'surrender to the special call of the text'.¹⁰ Baama is writing in order to change hearts and minds. And as a translator of her work, I am asked for nothing less than an imaginative entry into that different world of experience and its political struggle, and to re-inscribe that imaginatively.

From KARUKKU

Chapter 2

When I was studying in the third class, I hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is.

I was walking home from school one day, an old bag hanging from my shoulder. It was actually possible to walk the distance in ten minutes. But usually it would take me thirty minutes at the very least to reach home. It would take me from half an hour to an hour to dawdle along, watching all the fun and games that were going on, all the entertaining novelties and oddities in the streets, the shops and the bazaar.

The performing monkey; the snake which the snake-charmer kept in its box and displayed from time to time; the cyclist who had not got off his bike for three days, and who kept pedalling as hard as he could from break of day; the rupee notes that were pinned on to his shirt to spur him on; the spinning wheels; the Maariyaata temple, the huge bell hanging there; the pongal offerings being cooked in front of the temple; the dried-fish stall by the statue of Gandhi; the sweet stall, the stall selling fried snacks, and all the other shops next to each other; the street light always demonstrating how it could change from blue to violet; the *narikkuravan* hunter-gypsy with his wild lemur in cages, selling needles, clay beads and instruments for cleaning out the ears – O, I could go on and on. Each thing would pull me to a stand-still and not allow me to go any further.

At times, people from various political parties would arrive, put up a stage and harangue us through their mikes. Then there might be a street play, or a puppet show, or a 'no magic, no miracle' stunt performance. All these would happen from time to time. But almost certainly there would be some entertainment or other going on.

Even otherwise, there were the coffee clubs in the bazaar: the way each waiter cooled the coffee, lifting a tumbler high up and pouring its contents into a tumbler held in his other hand. Or the way some people

sat in front of the shops chopping up palm fruit, their eyes turned elsewhere so that they would not smart. Or the almond tree growing there and its fruit which was occasionally blown down by the wind. All these sights taken together would tether my legs and stop me from going home.

And then, according to the season, there would be mango, cucumber, sugar-cane, sweet-potato, palm-shoots, gram, palm-syrup and palm-fruit, guavas and jack-fruit. Every day I would see people selling sweet and savoury fried snacks, payasam, halva, boiled tamarind seeds and iced lollies.

Gazing at all this, one day, I crossed the street of the Pallas and came to my street, the street of the Parayas, that is, my bag slung over my shoulder. At the opposite corner, though, a threshing floor had been set up, and the Naicker was watching over the proceedings, seated on a piece of sacking spread over a stone ledge. Our people were hard at work, driving cattle in pairs, round and round, to tread out the grain from the straw. The animals were muzzled so that they wouldn't help themselves to the straw. I stood for awhile there, watching the fun.

Just then, an elder of our street came along from the direction of the bazaar. The manner in which he was walking along made me want to double up. I wanted to shriek with laughter at the sight of such a big man carrying a small packet in that fashion. I guessed there was something like vadai or green banana bhajji in the packet, because the wrapping paper was stained with oil. He came along, holding out the packet by its string, without touching it. I stood there thinking to myself, if he holds it like that, won't the package come undone, and the vadais fall out?

The elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naicker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadais.

After I had watched all this, at last I went home. My elder brother was there. I told him the story in all its comic detail. I fell about with laughter at the memory of a big man, and an elder at that, making such a game out of carrying the parcel. But Annan was not amused. Annan told me the man wasn't being funny when he carried the package like that. He said everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Paraya lads. If they do, they would be polluted. That's why he had to carry the package by its string.

When I heard this, I didn't want to laugh any more, and I felt terribly sad. How could they believe that it was disgusting if a Paraya held that package in his hands, even though the vadai had been wrapped first in a banana leaf, and then parcelled in paper? I felt so provoked and angry that I wanted to go and touch those wretched vadais myself, straightaway. Why should we have to fetch and carry for these people, I wondered. Such an important elder of ours goes off meekly to the shops to fetch snacks and hands them over reverently, bowing and shrinking,

to this fellow who just sits there and stuffs them into his mouth. The thought of it infuriated me. How was it that these fellows thought so much of themselves? Because they had scraped four coins together, did that mean they must lose all human feelings? What did it mean when they called us 'Paraya'? Had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings. Our people should never run these petty errands for these fellows. We should work in their fields, take home our wages, and leave it at that.

Both my grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. In the case of one of them, when she was working in the fields, even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belonged to the Naicker caste. And this grandmother, like all the other labourers, would call the little boy Ayya, Master, and run about to do his bidding. It was shameful to see them do this. Even the way they were given their drinking water was disquieting to watch. The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paati and the others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths. I always felt terrible when I watched this. My other Paati was the same. As soon as dawn broke, she would go to the Naicker houses, sweep out the cowshed, collect up the dung and dirt, and then bring home the leftover rice and curry from the previous evening. And for some reason she would behave as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods.

It was a long time before I realized that Paati was bringing home the unwanted food that the Naickers were ready to throw away. One day I went with Paati to the Naicker house. After she had finished all her filthy chores, Paati placed the vessel that she had brought with her, by the side of the drain. The Naicker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Paati's vessel, and went away. Her vessel, it seemed, must not touch Paati's; it would be polluted. Sometime later, I said to Paati she should not lay herself open to such behaviour; it was ugly to see. What Paati said to me in return was this: These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper caste from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower caste? Can we change this?

My elder brother, who was studying at a university, came home for the holidays. He would often go to the library in our neighbouring town in order to borrow books. He was on his way home one day, walking along the banks of the irrigation tank. One of the Naicker men came up behind him. He thought my Annan looked unfamiliar, and so he asked, 'Who are you, appa, what's your name?' Annan told him his name. Immediately the other man asked, 'Thambi, on which street do you live?' The point of this was that, if he knew on which street we lived, he would know our caste too. Annan's reply was sharp, like a slap in the face, 'I am a Paraya from the Cheri street.' Then he stalked off, as fast as he

could. Naicker was furious. He felt he had been shown up. He asked someone else there, 'Who is this fellow? Look at the way he talks.' This other man explained who Annan was, by mentioning our Paati, 'O, this is our Rakamma's grandson.'

The next day, when Paati went to work, the Naicker spoke to her angrily. 'How dared your grandson talk to me so arrogantly?' Paati managed to handle it by saying, 'See, Ayya, he's an educated lad; these college boys will talk like that.'

Apparently it was just the same at the library. They would look at the Paraya lads from the Cheri street in a certain way, with a certain contempt. Once, when Annan was signing out his books, he added his title, M.A., on a sudden impulse. Immediately the attendant brought him a stool to sit on, and what's more, began addressing him as 'Sir'.

Annan told me all these things. And he added, 'Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn.' The words that Annan spoke to me that day made a very deep impression on me. And I studied hard, with all my breath and being, in a frenzy almost. As Annan had urged, I stood first in my class. And because of that, many people became my friends, even though I am a Paraichi.

But it was the same story at school, though. They always spoke in a bad way about people of our caste. If ever anything bad happened, they would say immediately, and without hesitation, 'It must be one of the Cheri-children who did it.' About three-quarters of the children in the school were Pallar and Parayar. All the same, the priests had built the school in the Nadar street. The church too was in the same street, so was the priests' house.

Everyone seemed to think Harijan children are contemptible. But they didn't hesitate to use them for cheap labour. So we carried water to the teacher's house; we watered the plants; we did all the chores that were needed about the school.

Then I was in the seventh class. Every day, after school, I would play with the other children of our street before going home in the evening. There were two or three children who were related to me, and other boys and girls who always played together as a group.

One day, we were playing on the big neem tree in front of the school, hanging like bats, upside down from its branches. After a while, we started on another game – running right up the coconut palm and touching its tip. The coconut palm grew slantwise, at a convenient angle. If you came running along from a distance, at top speed, you could reach right to its tip and touch the coconut growing there. Spurred on by the excitement of the first few who managed to touch the coconut, those who

came later, grabbed it and gave it a twist before climbing down. By the time I got there and touched it, the coconut fell down straightaway, dropping with a thud. It wasn't even a fully ripened coconut, just a green one, without so much as water in it. All the children were frightened and ready to scatter. Everyone said that it was I who had plucked it down. Then we just left it there and ran home.

The next morning at assembly, the headmaster called me out by name. 'You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya,' he said. 'You climbed the coconut tree yesterday after everybody else had gone home, and you stole a coconut. We cannot allow you inside this school. Stand outside.' I was in agony because I had been shamed and insulted in front of all the children.

The headmaster was of the Chaaliyar caste. At that time, there was a battle going on between the Chaaliyar people and us, about the cemetery. All the children eyed me in a strange way and walked off to their classes. I was in such shock and pain, I didn't know what to do. Then a teacher who lived along our street came by and advised me to go to the priest, tell him everything, and bring a letter from him to the headmaster. I went to the priest and told him the whole story in detail, and begged him to give me permission to go back to school. The priest's first response was to say, 'After all, you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it.' The tears started welling up in my eyes, and I wept. After a long time, the priest wrote a note asking that I should be allowed to return to the school. When I took it to the headmaster, he abused me roundly, using every bad word that came to his mouth, and then told me to go to my classroom. When I entered the classroom, the entire class turned round to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still weeping.

NOTES

1. Baama, *Karukku* (Blades) (Madurai: Ideas, 1992). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Baama, *Sangati* (Happenings) (Madurai: Ideas, 1994).
3. Baama, *Kisumbukkāran* (Mischief-maker) (Madurai: Ideas, 1996).
4. S. Tharu & K. Lalita, *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the early twentieth century*, vol i, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.160.
5. Raj Gautaman, 'Olivaṭṭangaḷ tēvaiyillai' (We don't need haloes), *India Today*, Tamil edition, annual issue, 1995, pp.95-8.
6. Vidivelḷi, *Kalakkal* (Turmoil) (Madurai: Ideas, 1994).
7. Periyaar, *Pen yeen aḍimaiyaana!*? 1942; (Madras: Periyaar Suyamariyaadai Pirachaara Nirumvanam, 1987).
8. Quoted in Gail Omvedt, 'Dalit peenterkal, Tamil ilakkiyam, penkal' (Dalit Panthers, Tamil literature, women), *Nirappirikai* (Pondicherry), special edition (Nov. 1994), 3-7.
9. Gautaman, *op. cit.*
10. G.C. Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.183.